“Sorting Laundry”

by Elisavietta Ritchie

Folding clothes,

I think of folding you

into my life.

Our king-sized sheets

like tablecloths

for the banquets of giants,

pillowcases, despite so many

washings, seams still

holding our dreams.

Towels patterned orange and green,

flowered pink and lavender,

gaudy, bought on sale,

reserved, we said, for the beach,

refusing, even after years,

to bleach into respectability.

Do many shirts and skirts and pants

recycling week after week, head over heels

recapitulating themselves.

All those wrinkles

to be smoothed, or else

ignored; they’re in style.

Myriad uncoupled socks

which went paired into the foam

like those creatures in the ark.

And what’s shrunk

is tough to discard

even for Goodwill.

In pockets, surprised;

forgotten matches,

lost screws clinking on enamel;

paper clips, whatever they held

between shiny jaws, now

dissolved or clogging the drain;

well-washed dollars, legal tender

for all debts public and private,

intact despite agitation;

and, gleaming in the maelstrom,

one bright dime,

broken necklace of good gold

you brought from Kuwait,

the strangely tailored shirt

left by a former lover….

If you were to leave me,

if I were to fold

only my own clothes,

the convexes and concaves

of my bloused, panties, stockings, bras

turned upon themselves,

a mountain of unsorted wash

could not fill

the empty side of the bed.

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AP Literature and Composition

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6 January 2010

Poetry Explication

Laundry is a common task that basically everyone participates in. Although doing the laundry can become monotonous after some time, it is a part of life that is necessary to having clean clothes. Similarly, important relationships are part of every person’s life, and even though these relationships can be extremely difficult at some points, they are necessary to keeping people happy in life. The clothes people wear are washed over and over, to the point where the items fade and tear. Even so, the clothes are still clean and prepared for whatever life has to offer the second a person removes them from the washing machine. The same concept is true with relationships because permanent relationships are the ones that stay strong through the hardest times in life. “Sorting Laundry” by Elisavietta Ritchie uses imagery, simile, and metaphor to show how lasting relationships are able to withstand the many trials throughout life.

In “Sorting Laundry,” the author often uses imagery to add detail about the ups and downs of the relationship the poem discusses. An example of imagery is when the poem states that towels the couple own are “gaudy, bought on sale” (12). “Towels patterned orange and green, / flowered pink and lavender, / gaudy, bought on sale” (10-12). The words “gaudy” and “on sale” are able to create a picture in someone’s mind regarding the type of things the couple was able to afford at a specific time in their relationship. Since the towels were bought on sale, the poem creates a sense of possible struggle for the poem’s subject. Another example of imagery in “Sorting Laundry” is when the speaker talks about the way her life would be like if the other person left, explaining that not even massive amounts of laundry would fill the spot left behind (49-51). This stanza is able to create a picture of how the speaker of the poem feels toward his or her significant other. If the other person were to leave, the speaker would feel lonely and lost, and nothing would make those feelings go away. The use of imagery in “Sorting Laundry” helps give the reader a better sense of the type of relationship the couple has and also how they still stay together through hard times.

The purpose of simile is used in “Sorting Laundry” is to represent the type of relationship the subject in the poem has with someone about whom she cares. An example of simile is when the speaker compares the sheets he or she has to tablecloths for giants (4-6). The sheets are being compared to something very large, which connects to the couple having strong feelings for each other, even when they have something big to overcome. The simile also adds insight by showing the speaker’s thoughts toward the types of items he or she owns with a significant other. The speaker relishes in these thoughts because they are a reminder of not only the literal items shared with the other person, but also the life they share. Another example of simile in “Sorting Laundry” is when the poem states, “Myriad uncoupled socks / which went paired into the foam / like those creatures in the ark” (22-24). This simile of the socks compared to animals in an ark adds a somewhat humorous approach to the poem because of the connection made. The simile shows that The author uses the simile to show that although the socks going into the washing machine are not quite the same, the necessary job of getting them clean still occurs. Similarly, the couple may have their disagreements and differences, yet they still love each other. In “Sorting Laundry,” the use of simile further explains the relationship shared between two people.

Metaphors are present author used throughout “Sorting Laundry” to show the reader the devotion involved in any relationship and specifically in the speaker’s relationship. An example of metaphor in “Sorting Laundry” is when the poem states, “Folding clothes, / I think of folding you / into my life” (1-3). The speaker relates the laundry he or she does to the steps taken to include a significant other in a person’s life. The metaphor shows that effort needs to be put into the relationship and that the benefits from this are worth that effort. Another example of metaphor in “Sorting Laundry” occurs when the speaker says that her pillowcases still hold the dreams the couple has, even after they were washed many times (7-9). This metaphor shows that throughout everything people in a relationship experience, the goals and dreams that were present in the relationship in the beginning are usually there later on. In the speaker’s relationship, each person cares about the other even though they may have problems. The use of metaphor in “Sorting Laundry” helps the reader better understand the feelings the speaker has.

In “Sorting Laundry,” Elisavietta Ritchie uses different literary devices in order to support the subject matter of her poem. Overall, the poem’s main point is to describe a long-lasting relationship that can withstand the difficulties it endures. The laundry in the poem is representative of the relationship, since the laundry is always a task at hand. Similarly, the relationship between the speaker and the person she talks about is something that always takes hard work. The poem is able to inform and entertain with its subject matter and literary devices. In conclusion, “Sorting Laundry” by Elisavietta Ritchie uses imagery, simile, and metaphor to explore the positive and negative aspects of a relationship.

Work Cited

Ritchie, Elisavietta. “Sorting Laundry.” Perrine's Literature Structure, Sound, and Sense. Ed. Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson. 9th ed. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 1970. 767-768.

